



Distance learning has taken on a whole new meaning at Madison College-Watertown campus. A new technology is allowing teachers and students over 30 miles away seem as though they're physically in the same room.

On picture: Students at Madison College-Watertown campus are pictured above during a class using the new TelePresence technology. Seated from left, are Heather Zoellick, of Watertown; Lisa Tenerelli, of Reeseville; and Marilyn Martin, of Helenville. Their teacher Kris Held, in Fort Atkinson, is pictured on the far right screen. Other classmates in Fort Atkinson are also pictured on the other screens. (TERESA STOWELL/Daily Times)

Madison College, also known as Madison Area Technical College, was the first school in the nation to test and use the new TelePresence technology developed by Cisco Unified Communications. Although the technology has been used in the business world for some time, it has been adapted for use in education.

While past distance learning classes included delayed movement and words over a fuzzy television or computer screen, the new TelePresence system is very lifelike. It transmits life-size, high-definition images and spatial discrete audio to deliver real-time, face-to-face interaction between people at distant sites, using advanced visual, audio and collaboration technologies.

The system includes three large flat screen televisions with a white hood light behind them. Three cameras attached above the television screens pick up the video from the entire room. There is also a document camera where papers can be shown and Internet sites can be brought up in both classrooms. The room can hold about 17 students with each station including a small laptop computer.

"It's like making a really fancy phone call," Chris Yero, one of the first instructors to use the system, said, "The system is run through the phone line, so all I have to do is push a button on the phone and the system will turn on in both classrooms."

Yero said two students who have been taking several classes together through the old style distance learning system were amazed by the quality of the new program.

"The first time they took the class with TelePresence they looked at each other and said, 'That's what you look like!'" Yero said. "The TelePresence system really makes you feel like you're in the same room as those who are at a different campus."

Thursday afternoon Kris Held filled in for Yero and taught her Word Processing Applications class. Marilyn Martin, of Helenville, raised her hand to ask Held a question. Although Held was teaching from Fort Atkinson she looked and sounded as though she were only a few feet away.

"This system is amazing," Held said. "If a student is in the front row I can see every doodle or word they are writing down through the screen where I am. I can hear every word of a whisper. The sound even varies from the front of the room to the back of the room."

Held explained to students the details on how to write a block style business letter. Students in Watertown could listen and even watch as their classmates in Fort Atkinson also took notes or paged through their book. It was like they were all sitting around one big round table.

"No distance education has ever given us the quality of picture or sound that TelePresence has," she said. "This is by far the best system."

The system was initially tested at Watertown and Fort Atkinson campuses throughout last summer. Now six of the Madison College campuses also have a TelePresence room. With the access available throughout the college district, Lynn Forseth, Regional Economic and Workforce Development Director, said it will allow more class options for students with convenience and a better learning experience.

"The students are far more engaged with TelePresence and are more able to converse freely in the class," Forseth said. "You just don't see the kind of inhibitions they had with interactive television."

Currently the programs with courses offered through TelePresence include finance,

administrative assistant, sales academy certificate, help desk support specialist and supervisory management.

Madison College administrators plan on expanding the curriculum offered through the TelePresence system to include other liberal arts subjects such as reading, writing and history.

Although it took a little getting used to, students at Watertown's campus are enjoying the experience.

"I panicked when I heard I was going to be on camera during the whole class," Martin said. "Now it's like the cameras just fade away and you're sitting in the same room. If for some reason I had to go to Fort Atkinson for class I'd feel very comfortable because I feel like I know everyone."

By Teresa Stowell of the Daily Times staff
Source: wdtimes.com